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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DUBAI 001452

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SUBJECT: NEEDLES FOR PRISONERS, AND OTHER DRUG UPDATES FROM IRAN

REF: A) 04 DUBAI 5089; B) DUBAI 528

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CLASSIFIED BY: Jason L Davis, Consul General, Dubai, UAE.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

1.(C) Summary: Iran's Judiciary Chief approved a new program to provide needles in certain prisons to try to stem the spread of HIV/AIDS. In doing so, Iran is admitting that there are drugs in prisons. The new mayor of Tehran is trying to move addicts off the streets and into designated prisons called "boot camps." No change in Iran's drug policy or cooperation with U.S. universities on drug addiction programs has been noted to date under the new administration. End summary

Needles for prisoners

2.(C) According to press reports citing Deputy head of State Prisons Organization for Health and Rehabilitation Parviz Afshar, Iranian prisons will institute a new program of supplying needles in 10 prisons in the new year (i.e. starting March 21.) A senior official with the Iranian National Center for Addiction Studies confirmed the report to PolEconChief, saying Judiciary Chief Mahmoud Shahrudi gave permission for the needle-syringe program (NSP). (Note: NSP differs from needle exchange in that NSP does not require old needles to be turned in). The official commented that Shahrudi has been forward-leaning in reforms related to drug addiction, though not in other areas. He also said Afshar was a colleague and had done good work on addiction programs for prisoners. (As noted Ref B, it is not uncommon for 100-1000 inmates to share a single needle in Iranian prisons.)

3.(C) The official said that out of 200 prisons in Iran, 20 have anti-addiction programs with a total of 2000 participants. Prisoners are tested for HIV/AIDS only voluntarily, and the test results are not shared with prison authorities. HIV positive prisoners can receive antiviral medicines from in-house clinics.

Condoms another issue

4.(C) According to the official, the decision to allow an NSP was politically difficult, because it necessitated an admission that there are drugs in prisons. On the other hand, condoms are not available in prisons, other than in so-called "religious meeting rooms," where conjugal visits are allowed between

married couples. (Note: according to the official, conjugal visits used to be offered as a reward for good behavior but are now considered a right for any married prisoner.) Distribution of condoms anywhere other than in those rooms would be an admission that homosexual behavior occurs in prison. The official said that in Iran, dealing with issues related to drug abuse is much easier than dealing with homosexuality, which remains taboo.

Law Enforcement

5.(C) The official mentioned that Tehran Mayor Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf is spearheading a campaign to get addicts off the streets before the Iranian New Year holiday of Noruz on March 21. He said the municipality wants to set up new "bootcamps" to house them but that funds are limited. The official described a boot camp as a special prison housing only individuals convicted of drug use. Normally, the sentence would be for a few months, with drug addiction treatment included. He said drug addicts would not be sent to boot camps extra-judicially. The goal would be to take drug users out of the regular prison system, thereby reducing overcrowding (and possibly the spread of HIV/AIDS). The official said he and other health officials working on addiction programs oppose the notion of boot camps, because they are very expensive and drug addicts do not respond well to forced treatment. He thought the money would be better spent on voluntary outpatient clinic care and shelters.

6.(C) 2005 press reports (Ref A) indicated that the judiciary wanted to change sentencing guidelines to reduce the number of drug users, as opposed to drug distributors, in prison; this official said no such changes have been introduced yet.

7.(C) Throughout Iran, there are both government and private drug addiction clinics. Private clinics are allowed as a result of a 1997 amendment legalizing drug treatment. The official said people tend to trust the confidentiality and the quality of private clinics more than government clinics, but in reality all

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doctors are bound by rules of patient confidentiality. They do not release the names of their clients to the police unless ordered to by a judge. According to the official, 200,000 people sought drug addiction treatment in 2005 at clinics in Iran.

8.(C) When asked about corruption among law enforcement officials, the Center for Addiction Studies official said some of his patients have been soldiers who did their military service in the police. They claimed that on occasion they were told not to bother certain caravans. However, in the view of the health official, corruption facilitating drug trafficking occurs principally at low levels of authority. He said police can arrest anyone suspected of using drugs without a warrant, and then test their urine for drugs. That said, police do not tend to make general sweeps but to target people in areas known as congregating points for addicts. He believes the government probably has at times used drug charges as an excuse to jail political dissidents such as journalists but did not think this occurred often.

No Change in Policy

9.(C) The official told us he had not seen any change in drug policy under Ahmadinejad, but that he expects that the increased presence of former IRGC in the new government will lead to a greater emphasis on interdiction. He said the army would not directly profit from any shifting of resources, since the police, not the military, carries out interdiction. Relations between the police and the military, however, tend to be close. He also medical-related policies in Iran tend to be apolitical, as bureaucrats in the Ministry of Health face problems from the Majles if they ignore medical expert recommendations.

10.(C) When asked his assessment of the new secretary of the Drug Control Headquarters, Fada-Hussein Maleki, he said it has become clearer over time that Maleki is in favor of treatment as well as interdiction policies (Ref A).

11.(C) He also remarked that to date, he has not heard of any pressure from the government to cut university-to-university ties with American institutions. The official, on his way to meetings in the U.S., mentioned that if his workload permits it, he is planning a year's fellowship next year at a U.S. university.

General Update

12.(C) Drug addiction clinics in Iran are called "triangular clinics," because their mandate includes counseling and treatment for sexually transmitted diseases, HIV/AIDS, and drug abuse. Clients for the triangular clinics outside of prisons in Iran are generally in their 20's and 30's and include some prostitutes, which the official says remains a very sensitive subject. Young people still smoke opium, the traditional drug of Iran, but also use other heroin-based drugs, including a heroin-based form of crack, as well as other amphetamine and synthetic drugs. The official said he has heard from patients that some synthetic drugs are produced inside Iran.

13.(C) The average age of those beginning to inject drugs is 26, higher than in many countries, according to the official, because the typical road to injecting drugs is longer. Typically, an Iranian intravenous drug user starts by smoking opium (2-4 grams/day), then begins eating opium (4-5 grams/day), then moves on to "shira" or opium juice, which is more concentrated. He/she then switches to sniffing heroin and only then progresses to shooting up.

14.(C) The official said that in many places in the south, such as around Bam, up to 10% of the population is involved in the drug trade. Opium continues to be treated in many places like alcohol is in the west - parents use it, but tell their children not to. It is sometimes smoked at social events like weddings.

15.(C) When asked about drug use among officials, the official said it is known that former President Khatami's father used opium but had no information about high-level officials. He said there are rumors the Supreme Leader uses opium as a painkiller for the injuries he sustained in an assassination attempt but indicated he had no information to confirm it. He mentioned there are private clinics that cater to society's elite. The Iranian National Center for Addiction Studies has trained about 500 Iranian doctors in addiction treatment, he added; the center is also offering training to doctors in other countries of the region.

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16.(C) When asked whether he thought programming via private U.S.-based Farsi-language satellite channels on 12-step type drug programs has been useful inside Iran, the health official said he believed it was useful for some, but not for hard-core users.

Comment

17.(C) This health official appears very dedicated to his profession and basically apolitical -- apart from being pleased that so far, the new government has not reduced support for drug treatment programs in Iran. He is not involved in drug interdiction, and so has little access to information on that issue, other than what he hears anecdotally from colleagues or patients.

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